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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN INTERIOR MINISTER OUTLINES IMMIGRATION POLICY

¶1. (U) Summary: Austrian Interior Minister Maria Fekter outlined her views on immigration and integration in a December 4 speech in which she proposed that Austria develop a balanced policy avoiding the extremes of assimilation and multiculturalism. She said Austria would participate in an EU-wide program to enable workers from outside the EU to apply for jobs in EU countries, while stressing that applicants should be fluent in German. She also criticized the Dublin Convention and called for a policy of distributing asylum applications among EU states on a per capita basis. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Speaking at a symposium celebrating the 15th Anniversary of the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), Fekter offered a preview of how the new Austrian government will address migration issues. She maintained that Austria, like other countries, needs a certain level of immigration, and should develop strategies for regulating immigration and promoting integration. Governments tend to pursue one of two general integration policies - assimilation or multiculturalism - and both have potential pitfalls, she averred. A policy based on assimilation can fail if it is perceived as "forced assimilation," while multiculturalism - a positive concept - can lead to the formation of ethnic ghettos. Austria needs to form a policy that avoids these pitfalls, she concluded.

¶3. (U) Fekter remarked that efforts to deal with large scale migration from specific countries or regions started with the Budapest Process, which introduced new EU-wide measures aimed at preventing irregular migration. Human trafficking is a particular concern, as it creates "waves of illegal migrants" and leads to serious human rights violations. It is therefore necessary to set in place policies and programs that deal with the humanitarian and social environment in the countries of origin of illegal migrants in order to weaken the attraction of illegal migration, she said.

¶4. (U) Fekter also addressed the issue of the new EU "Blue Card," which is designed to give migrant workers access to job opportunities in EU countries. She noted that the GOA coalition agreement outlines plans to implement the Blue Card in Austria. The card would be targeted at workers with special qualifications and would aim to meet the needs of the Austrian labor market. One requirement for attaining a Blue Card for Austria would be fluency in German. The card would also provide certain rights for members of a migrant worker's immediate family, she said.

¶5. (U) On resettlement of refugees, Fekter emphasized Austria's commitment to the UN, including programs of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). She said UNHCR assists in the handling of refugees entering Austria from the east, from places like Chechnya, Georgia, and Africa.

¶6. (U) Fekter spoke critically of the Dublin Convention, under which refugees seeking political asylum in the EU are generally required to apply in the country where they first entered the EU. She asserted that the Convention has resulted in a disproportionate burden on certain EU states -- like Austria, Belgium, Italy, Greece, Cyprus and Malta - located on or near the periphery of the EU. She proposed that a "burden per capita" system be established instead. She acknowledged, however, that the larger EU states would be

unlikely to support such a change, noting that France and the UK had rejected a per capita-based plan at an EU meeting 15 years ago.

Comment: Implementation Will Be Difficult

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¶7. (SBU) Implementing the EU Blue Card in Austria may prove more difficult than Fekter indicates. Immigration and integration have long been controversial in Austria, and are likely to become more so in light of the economic downturn. This could prove to be one of the toughest challenges facing the new government.

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